

Mr. Jason Reitman

Sony Pictures Entertainment

10202 Washington Blvd.

Culver City, CA 90232

Dec. 10, 2018

Dear Mr. Reitman,

I am writing to follow up on our previous email exchange in which I told you of my displeasure about the grotesquely negative portrayal of me in "The Front Runner" and its impact, both real and potential, on my reputation. I have been advised to memorialize my concerns in a more formal manner than email may allow, thus this letter and my intention to share it widely.

You are no doubt well aware of the consensus among professional film critics that you have portrayed me in a way that I and others believe could seriously damage my professional reputation and my livelihood if left uncorrected.

The New York Times' chief critic A. O. Scott pulled no punches in writing this:

*The villain is Tom Fiedler (Steve Zissis), a Miami Herald reporter who is in every way Hart's opposite: slovenly, craven, opportunistic, inarticulate.... Fiedler's cravenness is also contrasted to the ethical anguish of A.J. Parker (Mamoudou Athie), a Washington Post reporter who pursues the adultery story with reluctance and distaste. (Fiedler is a real person. Parker is a fictional composite, partly based on E.J. Dionne.)*

Let me repeat from the above: "Fiedler is a real person."

In your email to me, you dismissed my concerns by saying that, "I've never thought of you as the villain of the film." Of Scott's review, you wrote that it was "missing the nuance" of actor Steve Zissis's portrayal of me. Yet Scott was not an outlier in emphasizing the negative, if not the despicable.

The Boston Globe's chief critic described my film character as "touchingly maladroit," which in contrast to other descriptions is almost kind. The Los Angeles' Times critic wrote that, "The portrayal of Fiedler and his Herald cohorts leans toward

opportunism..." Rolling Stone said that I was a "pioneer in 'gotcha' journalism." New York magazine's critic describes my character as a "schlubby scribe" and -- perhaps most blunt of all -- Variety's reviewer said my screen persona is "some kind of slimy, bottom-of-the-food-chain sell-out -- the Judas of political journalism."

I find no nuance there.

As you attempted to explain to me when we briefly spoke after I viewed the film, Steve Zissis' role wasn't to portray me realistically, it was to help contribute to the narrative arc. Apparently that meant that I was assigned the part of "villain" because every narrative with a hero needs an opposing bad guy. This may be fine in a fiction film, but it collided with the facts here. My reporting on this story was deeply sourced and scrupulously checked for accuracy and fairness. Are you aware that the Society of Professional Journalists gave me its top award for my coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign, which of course was highlighted by the reporting on Gary Hart? Do you know I shared a Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for a different story about political corruption, which I believe speaks to my competence as a journalist? Did you know that I was named the Goldsmith Fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government for the 2007-2008 year in large part because of my leadership in journalistic ethics?

And how is it that in 2018, the year of the #MeToo movement, you would portray as the villain the journalist who exposed a powerful man's predatory interest in a star-struck young woman, while the predator is the flawed hero? If you did a movie about Harvey Weinstein's fall from the pinnacle of Hollywood power, would Ronan Farrow be portrayed as a "slimy schlub?" Of course you know the answer.

It is to my everlasting gratitude that scores of former journalism colleagues, co-workers here at Boston University and friends have publicly risen on social media, broadcast media, in newspaper columns and on other platforms to protest this portrayal of me. I solicited none of this. Nevertheless, given the reach of this film, your portrayal of me isn't without consequence.

Even today, parents of students making the decision of where to go to college to study journalism might reject Boston University because they now believe that, at a point in my career, I was "opportunistic" and "craven." Had your film come out a decade ago when I was under consideration for the position I now have as dean of the College of Communication -- one of the most respected schools of its kind in the nation -- it's not crazy to think that the search committee would have looked elsewhere for someone with a less "problematic" past. That's speculation, of course. But I think it likely that countless numbers of film goers will conclude that, because my real name is used in the film, the portrayal must be accurate or Sony's lawyers wouldn't allow it.

Which brings me to my closing question about your sense of basic ethics and common courtesy. You told me that Hugh Jackman worked extensively with Gary Hart so as to

achieve a high level of verisimilitude in his portrayal. In fact, the film notes report extensive interaction between several cast members and the actual people they portray. That's appropriate and has been done in such recent films as "Spotlight" to ensure the facts are right.

Yet *nobody* involved in your film gave me even a courtesy heads-up that I was a major character in it. I wonder if Steve Zissis ever went to the trouble of finding a photograph of me, much less researched my reputation. Had he done so he would have known I've never worn a beard; that I take pride in my appearance and in my physical fitness (I have completed 40 marathons, an ironman triathlon and am a master's swimmer). And I certainly don't rudely hang-up on phone callers who offer important information. Perhaps you knew none of this because we'd never met. But Matt Bai, who used to care about facts before he left journalism for Hollywood, well knows it. I am deeply disappointed that he didn't warn you that Zissis, through no fault of his own, failed miserably to capture who I was in 1987.

I am copying many others with whom you collaborated or who were otherwise involved in the film's production, including the leadership at Sony Pictures and some journalists who reviewed the film. I accept the fact that in comparison to the reach of your film my objections in this letter are just whispers in a windstorm. But I do have a request: That you publicly acknowledge that the film's depiction of me is essentially a fiction and that you issue a statement identical or similar to the following:

*"As we make clear in the credits, the events depicted in 'The Front Runner' aren't factual. Although many of the characters are based on real people, their actions are heavily fictionalized. We took liberties with Mr. Fiedler's portrayal by Steve Zissis for narrative effect, and the portrayal is in no way meant to depict the real-life actions of the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist."*

My hope is that in the future you, your co-writers, your producers and your funders will think more deeply before doing a film that not only distorts the reality of a historic event, but affects – and possibly does real damage – to people like me involved in those events. I will again close with the question I left with you in our email exchange and for which I await your reply: Where do I go to get my reputation back?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Fiedler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

CC: Matt Bai; Jay Carson; Helen Estabrook, Right of Way Films; Aaron L. Gilbert, Bron Studios; A. O. Scott, *New York Times*; Sopan Deb, *New York Times*; Ty Burr, *The Boston Globe*; Rene Rodriguez, *The Miami Herald*; Michael Keating, Foley Hoag LLP; Richard Nicolazzo; Ciara McVey, *The Hollywood Reporter*; Margeaux Sippell, *Variety*